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My work explores imaginative relationships between objects and their function. Using both kinetic and interactive elements I ask questions of the precarious relationship between utility and futility. Looking for unusual, unorthodox, or unexpected ways to fulfill functional roles I hope to challenge social norms and stereotypes. The work calls upon the viewer to question their own passive or active role in society. Are we contributing to homogeneity, simply fulfilling obligation or expected behavior? Or can our interaction within the world be informed in the many possible ways of seeing, as an active dialogue that risks vulnerability and awkwardness? My intent for these artworks is to utilize objects of function to access and explore fundamental human characteristics: vulnerability, awkwardness, and humor.

UNEXPECTED UTILITY

by

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PREFACE

“You know what that is?” my grandfather asked.

He handed me a rusted piece of metal. I turned it over in my hand, examining it and attempting to identify what it was. It was finely crafted, probably forged steel, around the size and length of a banana. The top had a perfectly shaped sphere. Extending downward, the bottom jutted out and wrapped around an empty space ready to receive another part. It seemed to have a function, one that was oddly specific.

“Maybe a handle?” I gazed out among the sea of rusted metal that was my grandparents’ junkyard. The twisted metal corpses of a dozen broken cars lay among splintering wooden boxes overflowing with bits of construction material, coils of wire, rotting furniture, and rusted machinery. Dirty porcelain bathtubs held collections of springs, doorknobs, and other hardware just a distance from the iron claw feet that had once supported them. Crates of unidentified glass bottles were scattered across the ground where mountains of rusty treasures awaited my discovery. The objects had been collected for decades, piling up and sprouting weeds, shuffled around by my grandfather as he bought and sold bits for extra income. My grandparents were antique dealers and metal salvagers; they were historians of objects.

I began to list a few possibilities. It could be a garden decoration, but its rugged material suggested more than ornamentation. My grandfather smiled,

explaining its purpose, and where he had gotten it from. This dialogue had become a type of game between my grandfather and me. While to most people, the objects around us were nothing other than pieces of junk, to me and my grandfather they represented a world of endless possibility. Each item contained a story embedded in its past, a portal into the imagination of those who made it, each intended for a specific use. Although they sat in decay, they still held onto the inquiry and purpose for which their original maker created them.

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CHAPTER I

OBJECTS OF PURPOSE

I have always been interested in objects of purpose. Even at rest, items of utility imply an account of human usage. Functional items cannot be separated from the subsequent process they were designed for. A wheel is for rolling, a hammer is for smashing, a chair is for sitting. However, even objects that are primarily for utility have aesthetic qualities, though the nature of these objects makes these qualities invisible to us. Our interactions with useful objects are so focused on function that we often cannot see them in any other light.

Functional fixedness is a cognitive bias in our society that keeps us from seeing things for other than their intended purpose. (Duncker, 1945) A hammer? That is only for hammering. A conveyor belt? That belongs in a factory. A broom? That is only for sweeping. A cabbage? That is only for cooking. The problem with functional fixedness is that it limits our ability to imagine other possibilities. Some ramifications of this cognitive bias might include limits on creativity, or an inability to innovate. Furthermore, functional fixedness may be a symptom of a larger cultural problem. Our inability to imagine other realities and fixation on patterns of thinking may be contributing to social problems we face today: conformity to stereotypes, identity, and social norms.

In my work I utilize cabbages, brooms, and other everyday items in absurd or unexpected ways. By activating the utility of the object in a context outside of its intended use, I ask the viewer to react to the object through humor, imagination, and reflection.

By doing so I explore ways to move past functional fixedness. This involves understanding the inherent useful characteristics within an object, the use of imagination to visualize potentially unorthodox or unusual ways to solve a problem, and an ability to look past the idea of how things “should” be.

Humor

Humor is a natural result of using objects in strange and awkward ways, but it has also become a necessary component of my work. Humor requires a human perception of something in the world that the perceiver can relate to. In my work, this quality occurs in objects that are designed for utility. In Henri Bergson’s essay: *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, he makes a point that:

...comedy does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it... (Bergson, 1911)

One cannot help but laugh at objects employed in absurd ways because functional objects carry the imprint of human usage, and by placing them in absurd positions or unexpected situations I am alluding to equally unusual or surprising human behaviors.

Imagination

Everyday objects offer a myriad of possibilities into imaginative realities. My interest in objects has centered specifically around objects of utility. Objects designed by humans to fulfill a specific purpose engage the imagination by calling into question other possible purposes; in other words, the teleological possibilities of the object.

Objects designed for human use have an *extrinsic* purpose. These objects owe their existence to their function as part of another process or goal beyond themselves. For example, a hammer was not designed for its own end (just to be and exist as a hammer), but rather to fulfill a role in a function. All the components of the design stem from its intended use. The head of the hammer is heavy to exert force and its handle exists for someone to hold and operate. Consequently, when we encounter objects that we suspect have an extrinsic teleological explanation for their design we cannot help but imagine these functional processes; our imagination goes beyond what is immediately before

us. Connotations, memories, or guesses of intended use spiral through our brain when looking at these objects.

This teleological process explains my fascination when searching through my grandfather's junkyard. The specificity in design of these objects hinted at a purpose beyond what I was holding in my hand. Like fitting together pieces of a puzzle, I was left to imagine what role these objects played in a greater purpose or goal.

Kant's philosophy of art and discussion of aesthetics often discussed the teleology of objects. When Kant discussed how we judge or perceive the world around us, he talked about how we judge "useful" and "beautiful" objects differently. J.H. Bernard, the editor of the English translation of Kant's book *The Critique of Judgement* stated:

A beautiful object has no purpose external to itself and the observer; but a useful object serves further ends. Both, however, may be brought under the higher category of things that are reckoned purposive by the Judgement...The characteristic of the object called beautiful is that it betrays a purposiveness without definite purpose. (Bernard, 1892)

When Kant discussed how we judge or perceive the world around us, he talked about how we judge "useful" and "beautiful" objects differently. Kant categorizes objects made by humans in two categories: as "art" and as "handicraft."

Art also differs from handicraft; the first is called free, the other may be called mercenary. We regard the first as if it could only prove purposive as play, i.e. as occupation that is pleasant in itself. But the second is regarded as if it could only be compulsorily imposed upon one as work,

i.e. as occupation which is unpleasant (a trouble) in itself, and which is only attractive on account of its effect (e.g. the wage) (Kant, 1892)

Objects designed not to bring pleasure but to serve a functional purpose- what Kant would call “handicraft”- are distinctly separated from objects designed for aesthetic purposes. While we can appreciate objects categorized as art for the immediate pleasure they offer, we appreciate handicrafts for the effects they have, not the objects themselves.

My goal in my artwork is to take objects of utility and subvert their expected purpose. I am interested in the imaginative process that occurs by introducing an element of uselessness. I am blurring lines between categories of utility and futility and exploring what Kant would call the “purposive” quality of objects.

Reflection

Engaging the viewer’s imagination by using objects of utility, I could then subvert expectations of their function. As a result, the viewer is invited to reflect as they reconsider utility or assumptions in their own life.

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was interested in the interpretation of perception. He talked about how we perceive the “rabbit duck illusion,” in which the image of both a duck and a rabbit coexist. Perception of the image depends on the viewer themselves, neither are *correct* but rather reflect the experience of the viewer.

For example, someone who sees and interacts with rabbits on a daily basis is much more likely to see a rabbit. Wittgenstein draws attention to the complexity of seeing, and the importance of interpretation.

I am shown a picture-rabbit and asked what it is; I say "It's a rabbit". Not "Now it's a rabbit". I am reporting my perception. —I am shown the duck-rabbit and asked what it is; I may say "It's a duck-rabbit". But I may also react to the question quite differently. —The answer that it is a duck-rabbit is again the report of a perception; the answer "Now it's a rabbit" is not. Had I replied "It's a rabbit", the ambiguity would have escaped me, and I should have been reporting my perception. The change of aspect. "But surely you would say that the picture is altogether different now!" But what is different: my impression? my point of view? —Can I say? I describe the alteration like a perception; quite as if the object had altered before my eyes....

...If you are looking at the object, you need not think of it; but if you are having the visual experience expressed by the exclamation, you are also thinking of what you see. Hence the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought. Someone suddenly sees an appearance which he does not recognize (it may be a familiar object, but in an unusual position or lighting); the lack of recognition perhaps lasts only a few seconds. Is it correct to say he has a different visual experience from someone who knew the object at once? (Wittgenstein, 1963)

Wittgenstein is interested in the way that prior perceptions of an object affect how we experience it. He emphasizes the importance of perception in distinguishing interpretations of the image. Ambiguity is lost when we have a preconceived mental category for an object of perception, an ambiguity that for me is full of possibility and excitement.

Ambiguity means that an object is open to a multiplicity of possible functions or interpretations. In my sculpture, I employ objects with very set functions and free them from their expected state. Using objects so profoundly

tied to specific human scripts and expectations disrupts our patterns of categorization. These objects are now visible to the viewer in ways they were not before, no longer fixed into a function, and so therefore made ambiguous.

CHAPTER II

IMPLIED MOVEMENT

One way I challenge functional fixedness and explore human reactions of humor, imagination, and reflection is by using implied movement to give agency to the functional object.

The first set of works I made in my thesis exhibition used curved lines to imply movement. A curved, catapult like structure appears to be about to give way. A winding, undulating conveyor belt with roller-coaster qualities, alludes to the operation and movement of objects it will carry across space. By bending and shaping materials such as wood and metal, I create an illusion of movement. I introduce an absurd sculptural material into these works: a cabbage. The cabbage creates a space of tension as it subverts the traditional implications (foodstuffs) or purposes (eating) for a cabbage.

By implying movement which connotes a function or set of functions that is purposefully at odds with the utility of an object—the cabbage, in this case—the viewer is opened to imaginative possibilities of a normally mundane or static object. The implied movement is what changes the utility of the cabbage, converting it from a static object of consumption to a vital component of a machine or system, one which appears to have a purpose, but actually lacks one, leaving the viewer to create new possibilities for the object.

Counterweight

In *Counterweight*, the cabbage becomes an object of utility, rather than an object to be consumed. The cabbage is given agency. It appears to be under tension and perfect balance. The viewer imagines the possibilities of movement if the equilibrium were to be disrupted. What will happen when the cabbage rots? Which cabbage will give way first?

This catapult like structure appears to have a purpose, but actually lacks one. Ultimate purpose is left to the viewer's own imagination.

Conveyor of Self

In *Conveyor of Self*, a series of curved conveyor belts create a rollercoaster like path for the cabbages. The viewer is left to fill in gaps in space with their own imagination. The curved lines like a roller reinforce this movement. Like a dotted line, the spaces between the conveyor belts guide the viewer through space. The viewer is left to distinguish the cause and effect of this situation. At the start of the conveyor belt path, just a few conveyor belt rollers extend outward from the wall -as if alluding to an originating path, that extends beyond our physical space in the gallery. A cabbage balances precariously at this point on the wall, either trying to decide its action, or fearfully facing its doom as it looks out upon the seemingly inescapable path. Below, the undulating path of rollers extends downward swooping vertically and very steeply. The dotted line of the conveyor belt system guides the viewer's eye downward across the

gallery. At the opposite end rests a pile of 50 cabbages. Similar to *Counterweight*, the viewer is left to try and make sense of this process, using their imagination to postulate. The viewer sees the “action” of the cabbages as a continuous (as suggested by the roller belts) action frozen in time in a 3D snapshot.

CHAPTER III

KINETIC WORK

The next evolution in my practice was to transition from implied to actual movement. Exploration of the work of Rebecca Horn made me interested in what actual movement could add to the work. By creating kinetic works that manipulate functional objects in unexpected ways, reactions of humor, imagination, and reflection are heightened. I chose to give my objects kinetic life to free them from their expected state; giving an object so profoundly tied to a specific human script and expectation the independent ability to move challenges the viewer's patterns of thinking. We have removed the human from a human/object system, but then given the object human qualities, making it a potential source of humor.

Because we empathize with objects that remind us of human beings, giving a particularly mundane object independent power is especially evocative for the viewer.

The first kinetic piece, *Not for Sweeping*, alludes to some of the inventive possibilities that my grandma employed with her broom. My grandmother, collector of china and other fine things, protected the house from dirt and animals. She was very strict.

Many memories of my grandmother involve her holding a broom on the porch. She would be chasing away a cobweb, pointing to her garden, or swatting the dogs to protect the cats. She would swat them with that broom right on the nose.

I remember her using it for everything but sweeping. She did not have functional fixedness. I also remember her laugh.

Not for Sweeping, was an exploration of moving past functional fixedness. Two brooms teeter precariously in circular rotation. Their bristles defiantly point to the air and away from their usual downward sweeping motion. The brooms themselves are defying utility. They are not doing what they “should” do: sweep the ground. The brooms balance precariously in space, affixed atop two large blue plumbing fixtures that were originally designed to rotate and redirect a current of water. Their physical heaviness as well as their aesthetic weight make these industrial valves nicely for this purpose. Spaced about 8 feet apart, their weight anchors them as well as provides tension for the belt that loops around fabricated bearing fixtures. The belt, supplying the piece with both visual and actual tension, becomes a way for the mechanical motion of the motor to transfer to the brooms.

I often found myself identifying with my sculptures. I kept putting myself in place of the brooms. I thought of two bodies awkwardly dancing around and toward each other, attempting to balance, in the way that humans constantly are searching for equilibrium.

In 6th grade, I bought myself a unicycle and I practiced on it for weeks. Over and over again I fell, got up and tried again. I had to learn that keeping your arms perfectly still was not the best way of staying in balance. The more I flung my arms around the more I was able to counterbalance the sway that would lead to falling. As I got better, less and less arm flailing was required, but my arms were always out and ready.

Researching the physics of balance, I discovered an illustration that helped me with my unicycling technique. The illustration describes a broom, being balanced in the air in the palm of your hand. Whichever direction the head or bristly part of the broom begins to fall, your hand below follows to catch up. Understanding this concept fundamentally changed my unicycling skills. This explains the need to lean your body (or the bristles of the broom), slightly forward in the direction in which you are trying to ride, which in turn, the rider will pedal to catch up (the palm of your hand.) Every time I rode, I imagined myself as a broom and my unicycle as my hand supporting me anyway I would start to fall.

When I see my sculpture *Not for Sweeping*, I put myself in the body of that broom. Tall and limb-like, the structure stands around human height. I relate to the counterintuitive flailing that is required for balance while unicycling. Is this same type of awkward flailing required to balance a relationship between people? However counterintuitive, I believe so. Displaying humanness or vulnerability connects people and strengthens human relationships.

Looking past functional fixedness can also be seen in *Uninhibited*. A rotational joint is made from a water foot-valve, that holds a ball-hitch, that connects to a bendable gas pipe, which attaches to a mop head that swings unashamedly around in the air. The tripod-like base of the piece consists of fabricated steel that I welded to a gigantic industrial size pipe flange.

In the piece, functionality is either subverted or denied. The assorted found and fabricated parts together create a functional ball joint rotational mechanism. It is activated by a timed motor that spins the mophead carelessly in the air. However, it rests upon 3 dysfunctional wheels. Turned and tilted inward, their original identity hints at their ability to move, but their placement at an odd angle stubbornly defies this possibility.

In *Overcompensate*, I employ industrial cart wheels to build a unicycle-type gravity and counterweight propelled vehicle. A long painting handle extender attaches to a fly-swatter. One can only imagine the limitless possibilities that await confrontation at the other end. Swat.

Comedy can offer us reassurance about where we stand. A shared joke is a shared world. (Bevis, 2013)

The humorous image of me flailing my arms around in the air to keep balance, is that of the human experience.

The same type of empathy I experienced in *Not for Sweeping*, I began to see in other works. The purple cabbage became a personification of myself balancing precariously in life. The root of my interest in functional objects was

rooted in the use they required of the viewer. Empathy was a natural result of this use as the viewer put themselves in place of or by interacting with these objects.

CHAPTER IV

INTERACTIVE SCULPTURE

My experience with the interactive sculptures of Erwin Wurm during the Venice Biennale over the summer made me realize there is no replacement for personal experience. It wasn't enough for the viewer to empathize as spectator. I wanted the viewer to experience first-hand and become part of the work.

Under the Lemonlight, was one of the first works I made that required actual activation by the viewer. The viewers themselves were essential to the concept of the piece.

Instructions: 1- sit on Chair 2- put on headphones 3- juggle as many lemons as you can.

The piece contained the same ideas as the previous works, but now called the viewer to function as juggler even if the person never had juggled before. The piece, if the viewer could risk looking absurd, created an experience of vulnerability and laughter that allowed people to connect with each other.

In these interactive works, I was creating objects to be used, but these uses are absurd, futile, or nonsensical. The viewer is faced with accepting loss of control, the unknown, and the ambiguous.

Utility of Futility, the last work in my thesis, embodies all of these ideas. A large steel purple structure alludes to both the organic shape and color of a

cabbage. The architectural beam-like structure is open for the viewer to see the inside. A bright yellow tractor chair sits within. Two golden yellow welding gloves perch on the inside across from the chair at a height right above head level. A protective mask hangs on the inside. All of these objects await human interaction. As the viewer approaches the work they are trying to figure out its end function. They sit in the chair, put the mask on their head, reach their hands forward into the gloves. They wait expectedly, but nothing happens. Instead of merely observing the object and contemplating what it might be used for the viewer actually uses the object. However, because the system has no actual utility the focus is drawn from the end purpose of an object to the system itself. There is no end goal- so the process itself gains a greater significance.

CHAPTER V

DEFIANCE OF SHOULD

These works eventually made me think differently about functional fixedness as it applies to society. I now think of functional fixedness as a symptom of a much larger cultural problem, and I see these works as a humorous and imaginative subversion of the idea of utility.

As I make these works I am excited about the immediacy of what they are. It's just a cabbage. Doing things a cabbage doesn't normally do. It's just a broom but this broom is not for sweeping. It's just a mop but this mop is uninhibited and free from its expected behavior. I relate to these objects because they are doing what they shouldn't.

We live in a society of constant pressures: academic pressures, social pressures, cultural or religious pressures. We are a society of "shoulds" and we train and educate children accordingly. Walk in to any classroom and count the "shoulds". "How should I write my name?" "How should I complete this project?" "How should I research this subject?" Students are constantly worried about how to please their teacher, how to perform on a test, how to fit into the system. This starts at a very young age and spirals out as they get older. You "should" go to school, you "should" get married, you "should" fulfill family / cultural/ career obligations. You should you should you should you should....

Could our lack of imagination actually be contributing to homogenization and conformity? Do we dare venture away from what is expected of us? My work calls upon viewers to question their own passive or active role in society.

Are we contributing to homogeneity, simply fulfilling obligation or expected behavior? Or do we challenge expectations even at the cost of looking absurd?

I hope that the authenticity of our inherently “human” characteristics of vulnerability and awkwardness are evident in this humorous work. Multiplicity of seeing results from trying to apprehend the ambiguous.

A man will be imprisoned in a room with a door that's unlocked and opens inwards; as long as it does not occur to him to pull rather than push.
(Wittgenstein, 1980)

My goal in my artwork is to challenge the viewer's patterns of thinking. By challenging functional fixedness, I am challenging the viewer's state of mind that might not otherwise see the world with the multiplicity it has to offer.

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CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

Figure 1. Counterweight

Figure 2. Conveyor of Self

Figure 3. Not for Sweeping

Figure 4. Not for Sweeping- detail

Figure 5. Uninhibited

Figure 6. Uninhibited- detail

Figure 7. Overcompensate

Figure 8. Under the Lemonlight

Figure 9. Utility of Futility

Figure 1. Counterweight



Figure 2. Conveyor of Self



Figure 3. Not for Sweeping



Figure 4. Not for Sweeping -detail



Figure 5. Uninhibited



Figure 6. Uninhibited -detail



Figure 7. Overcompensate



Figure 8. Under the Lemonlight



Figure 9. Utility of Futility

